



## Trait psychopathy, emotional intelligence, and criminal thinking: Predicting illegal behavior among college students



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### ABSTRACT

Research focusing on individuals high on trait psychopathy remains limited. Higher trait psychopathy is associated with lower levels of emotional intelligence and increased participation in illegal behavior. Additionally, research has confirmed significantly higher levels of criminal thinking and lower levels of empathy in the incarcerated psychopathic population. However, the relationships between trait psychopathy and criminal thinking have not been researched in the community or college population. To test for such differences, questionnaires containing relevant measures were administered to 111 college students. Results indicated that higher levels of trait psychopathy were significantly related to less caring for others, intrapersonal understanding, and general mood, and greater interpersonal functioning and stress management. Furthermore, trait psychopathy was a strong predictor of violent, property, drug, and status offenses. Power-oriented criminal thinking was also predictive of violent behaviors, and entitlement predicted property offending. Results suggest emotional intelligence is important for predicting psychopathy, and trait psychopathy is a strong predictor of all types of illegal behaviors among the non-incarcerated population.

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### 1. Introduction

Psychopathy has been characterized as a nomological net that combines callousness, narcissism, and a lack of remorse that is coupled with antisocial and impulsive behavior (Cleckley, 1941; Forth, Brown, Hart, & Hare, 1996). Existing literature suggests that our models of psychopathy may be inadequate for understanding psychopathy in the non-incarcerated population. The term “psychopathy” often elicits images of serial murderers or hardened criminals. However, as Cleckley (1941) and others have noted, individuals high on trait psychopathy often play functional roles in society, such as that of a salesperson or a CEO. Recent evidence suggests that psychopathy may be categorized as successful (i.e., remain in the community despite possessing traits of psychopathy) or unsuccessful (have been/are incarcerated and possess traits of psychopathy). As might be expected, incarcerated and community samples often display interpersonal affective traits associated with psychopathy, while involvement in the criminal justice system

is related to the antisocial impulsive traits associated with psychopathy (Gao & Raine, 2010; Ishikawa, Raine, Lencz, Bihrlé, & Lacasse, 2001).

Not surprisingly, the paucity of research on psychopathy in the general population has provided a less than comprehensive view of the etiology of successful psychopathy. For example, college students scoring high on self-report measures of trait psychopathy have improved our understanding of psychopathic traits. Overall, it appears that college students high on psychopathic traits display similar cognitive and emotional deficits (e.g., perspective taking, empathy) to incarcerated psychopaths (Gao & Raine, 2010).

Though research on psychopathy in the community supports the notion that community individuals high on trait psychopathy present with similar characteristics to incarcerated psychopaths (Mahmut, Homewood, & Stevenson, 2008; Widom, 1977), some notable differences have been observed. Interestingly, Osumi, Shimazaki, Imai, Sugiura, and Ohira (2007) found that successful psychopaths who scored low on emotional detachment had larger heart rate increases when exposed to stimuli from the International Affective Picture System intended to evoke a negative emotional response. Similarly, samples of community members with high trait psychopathy scores have been found to be more reactive than incarcerated high trait psychopathy samples on psychophysiological measures during a task designed to elicit negative emotions (Ishikawa

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et al., 2001). Such differences in emotional reactivity suggest that individuals high on trait psychopathy may differ on emotional reactivity. In particular, more research is needed to better understand how trait psychopathy relates to emotional functioning across the entire spectrum of emotional intelligence levels.

### 1.1. Psychopathy and emotional intelligence

One method used to assess emotional functioning is the examination of emotional intelligence. Vidal, Skeem, and Camp (2010) compared college students on their trait psychopathy and emotional intelligence levels. No differences in emotional intelligence were observed between high and low trait psychopathy groups formed using the Psychopathic Personality Inventory—Revised (PPI-R; Lilienfeld & Widows, 2005).

Grieve and Mahar (2010) measured trait psychopathy and emotional intelligence in an undergraduate sample. No differences in emotional intelligence were observed between the high and low psychopathy groups. Further, in a study conducted by Ali, Amorim, and Chamorro-Premuzic (2009), relationships between trait emotional intelligence, empathy, and psychopathy were examined in a sample of mostly female undergraduates in the United Kingdom. Findings indicated that trait emotional intelligence was positively correlated with the antisocial impulsive features, but not the affective interpersonal features, associated with high trait psychopathy.

### 1.2. Psychopathy and callousness

Studies investigating psychopathy have revealed a negative association between psychopathic traits and the affective component of empathic functioning (Lockwood, Bird, Bridge, & Viding, 2013; Seara-Cardoso et al., 2012, 2013). Conversely, strong positive correlations have been implicated between trait psychopathy and callousness among incarcerated and non-incarcerated populations (Blair, Mitchell, & Blair, 2005; Kirsch, 2009; Mahmut et al., 2008). For instance, Mahmut et al. (2008) found that callousness was significantly higher in males scoring high on trait psychopathy compared with males with low trait psychopathy. Kirsch's (2009) results indicated that individuals in the high trait psychopathy group presented with significantly lower empathy levels compared with the control (low psychopathy) group. Results from these studies suggest meaningful emotional functioning differences are present between participants rated as high and low in trait psychopathy in samples of undergraduates. Evidence is converging to suggest that a wide range of emotional factors should be used to predict psychopathy in the general population.

### 1.3. Psychopathy and criminal thinking

Criminal thinking references certain thinking styles that are more likely to lead to, support, and maintain a criminal lifestyle (Walters, 2007). Naturally, a substantial link between psychopathy, criminal thinking, and illegal behavior has been observed (Walters, 2007; Walters & Mandell, 2007). In research conducted by Dembo, Turner, and Jainchill (2007), high trait psychopathy was significantly related to elevated scores on all types of criminal thinking. Moreover, participants with high trait psychopathy were significantly more likely to have committed an offense compared with low and moderate trait psychopathy levels.

Gonsalves, Scalora, and Huss (2009) conducted a study in which criminal thinking and psychopathy were assessed in male forensic patients. Significant positive correlations were observed between the impulsive antisocial factor of psychopathy and criminal thinking, again supporting the notion that criminal thinking and the impulsive antisocial component of psychopathy are strongly linked. Ragatz, Anderson, Fremouw, and Schwartz (2011) also examined the relationship between psychopathy and criminal thinking styles in a sample of late high school bullies. Being classified as a bully was best predicted by

endorsing high levels of criminal thinking. Overall, findings confirm a strong relationship between trait psychopathy and criminal thinking, suggesting that both may be good predictors of illegal behavior, though more research is needed to confirm this link among non-incarcerated individuals.

### 1.4. Psychopathy and emotional intelligence as an explanation of illegal behavior

Individuals with high trait psychopathy often present with low levels of emotional functioning, which may predispose them to engage in illegal behaviors (Blair et al., 2005). Additionally, impulsive actions are common among individuals with high psychopathy (Herpertz & Sass, 2000), and previous research on an incarcerated sample indicates specific facets of psychopathy are linked to overt aggressive behavior (Cima & Raine, 2009), indirectly linking psychopathy and illegal behavior. Self-reported illegal behavior of college students high on trait psychopathy has been examined (Mahmut et al., 2008), but little has been done to elucidate the role of emotional functioning in the relationship between psychopathy and deviant behavior.

### 1.5. Research questions and hypotheses

#### 1.5.1. Research Question 1

Do measures of emotional intelligence, callousness, and empathy predict trait psychopathy within a sample of undergraduate students? Evidence suggests that emotional intelligence, callousness, and empathy would predict levels of psychopathy, though no study has examined these constructs concurrently in the general population. Because previous works have dichotomized the spectrum of psychopathy scores into high and low groups (Grieve & Mahar, 2010; Vidal et al., 2010), the amount of information that can be analyzed is reduced. Thus, the present study utilized a continuous measure of trait psychopathy. Facets of emotional intelligence, callousness, and empathy were hypothesized to significantly predict trait psychopathy in male undergraduate students.

#### 1.5.2. Research Question 2

Can trait psychopathy add unique predictive power to a model examining how well criminal thinking styles predict violent, property, drug, or status illegal behavior? Previous literature suggests that differential criminal thinking style patterns may predict specific types of illegal behavior (McCoy, K., Fremouw, W., Tyner, E., Clegg, C., Johansson-Love, J., & Strunk, J., 2006). Unfortunately, no study has investigated the concomitant roles of trait psychopathy and criminal thinking in predicting illegal behaviors. Therefore, it was predicted that higher scores on trait psychopathy would be associated with violent offenses, but not drug, status, or property offenses. Additionally, replication of previously observed patterns between criminal thinking and illegal behavior was anticipated.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

Male undergraduate students with an average age of 20.58 years ( $SD = 2.35$ ) who were enrolled in psychology courses at a large Mid-Atlantic university completed surveys for extra credit. The majority of participants were European American (97%). Participants were eliminated from analyses if any of the three following conditions were met: completed the measures in twenty minutes or less ( $N = 38$ ), appeared to provide invalid responses ( $N = 4$ ) on the Psychopathic Personality Inventory—Revised (PPI-R; Lilienfeld & Widows, 2005) validity scale, and their Bar-On EQ-i was invalid (Bar-On, 2008) ( $N = 19$ ). Following these selection procedures, 111 participants remained and were included in all subsequent analyses.

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